

DEMOGRAPHIC REPORT ON SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND EDUCATORS.**Jason Kushner***University of Arkansas at Little Rock***Jose Maldonado***Monmouth University***Tresvil Pack***University of Arkansas at Little Rock***Buddy Hooper***Texas A & M University-Texarkana*

Using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of the National Center for Education Statistics, this article describes data concerning educational expectations and use of school counselors for students enrolled in special education. Participants included students enrolled in special education from urban, suburban, and rural settings. Chi Square analyses revealed students in special education were as likely to use the services of school counselors as other groups. However, they had a lower educational expectation when compared to mainstream students. Recommendations and implications for school counselors and other educators were included.

In light of the current national focus of inclusion and education for all students due, in part, to the No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation, students enrolled in special education programs must be afforded the same opportunities for continued education beyond high school in order to enjoy the advantages of achieving postsecondary education. Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) remains a signal of the United States federal government's commitment to the postsecondary education and training of all individuals graduating from secondary schools. Postsecondary education has long been associated with upward mobility in the United States (Sewell & Houser, 1971) for its quality of life rewards in status and income. No longer is the promise of gainful employment and enrollment in postsecondary training something reserved for only the elite. Indeed, the future of the United States' economy is predicated, in part, on utilizing a highly educated workforce to its fullest potential. Because higher education is one of the most salient predictors of status attainment in America, teachers, school counselors, students, parents, policymakers, and the public are concerned with what factors contribute to postsecondary educational attainment (Lee, Daniels, Puig, Newgent, & Nam, 2008).

Background

Past research illustrates the fact that students who come from high socioeconomic backgrounds, intact families, involved schools, and who are motivated to succeed are most likely to remain in postsecondary education through degree achievement (Pong, 1998; Powell & Downey, 1997). Fewer than 40% of potential postsecondary students in the United States meet any combination of those characteristics for success, so mediating the gap for the majority of students in America is a crucial task for America's secondary and postsecondary institutions of learning (Horn & Berger, 2004). While some states with many rural districts have developed comprehensive developmental guidance programs to alleviate educational problems, they still have lower graduation rates and students enrolling in postsecondary education when compared to districts in more affluent suburban areas (Bergin & Miller, 1990). Unable to mobilize large-scale programs due to budget and staffing constraints, one of the advantages rural districts enjoy is the ability to engage the whole community in school education improvement projects (Bareis & Pries, 1987). Due to the smaller number of school counselors available to offer services in specific areas (e.g., drop out prevention, special education, specific issue counseling, teen pregnancy prevention), Rose-Gold, (1991) recommended a smorgasbord approach to service delivery. In order to best serve the unique needs of each district, conducting a needs assessment

for the guidance program enables each school within a district to tailor its counseling needs accordingly. In so doing efforts to increase retention at the secondary level and to promote success at the primary level can serve to address deficiencies and build upon the strengths each school has to offer to serve the needs of each student (Carter, 1992).

Students in special education face even more challenges than students in mainstream education due to barriers of access for high achieving students (Cross & Burney, 2005), inadequate alternative teaching methods, and accommodations at postsecondary institutions (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Students in special education in rural settings face the same challenges as those in other, more populated, areas with the added challenge of scarce resources in rural districts (Rose-Gold, 1991) and lack of postsecondary educational opportunities near their homes. Wagner and Blackorby (1996) found that only 27% of youths with disabilities in America had been enrolled in postsecondary school at any time by the time they had been out of high school three to five years. That percentage had not increased by the initial report of the National Longitudinal Transition Study in 2005 (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Comparatively, there was an attendance rate of 68% of youth from the general population that had been enrolled in postsecondary education within the same time period. Though the number of youth with disabilities seems low relative to the entire population, it has grown since the passing of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 because the legislation ensured that colleges and universities were more responsive to the needs of students in special education than before (Paolmbi, 2000). From 1986 until 1994, the percentage of students with disabilities in postsecondary education rose 16% (Hall & Belch, 2000).

One factor that influenced postsecondary educational attendance rates for individuals with disabilities was the type of disability. Students with learning disabilities, mental retardation or emotional disturbances were less likely to attend postsecondary education. Students with visual or hearing disabilities, by contrast, were found to attend postsecondary schools at close to the same rate as students without disabilities (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Fairweather & Shaver, 1990).

Demographic differences also play a role in the attendance rates of students with disabilities in postsecondary educational institutions. Wagner et al. (2005) found that students with disabilities were more likely to be poor, African American, and from single-parent households, factors which can create social and economic barriers to postsecondary education. While the rate of enrollment for the students without disabilities is more than twice that of the students with disabilities, a majority of students with special needs who attend any postsecondary education enroll in vocational training rather than a two or four year college. According to Wagner et al. (1996), only 4% of students with disabilities attended a four year college, 12% attended a two year college, and 16% attended vocational training. College bound students with disabilities face many challenges such as not understanding their individual disabilities, how their disability can affect their learning, and not knowing how to describe their disability to others (Sitlington, 2003).

In making the transition to higher education, students with disabilities are often afraid to disclose their disability to the institution for fear of discrimination, especially with cases of learning disabilities (Satcher, 1989). Secondary school counselors can assist students with disabilities in preparing for postsecondary education in order to help secure success for those students. Milsom and Hartley (2005) pointed out that school counselors should be advocates for all students and that they can play an important role in helping students with learning disabilities transition to college through their knowledge of the process, tests, and courses needed for college admission. Seidenberg (1987) suggested that counselors provide a transition plan for students with learning disabilities who plan on attending postsecondary education that includes knowledge of special services for students with disabilities, knowledge of disability legislation, and the ability to self-advocate. Although the Milsom and Hartley studies concentrated on students with learning disabilities, this transition plan could easily be used for any student with disabilities.

Other strategies can be used to help students with disabilities transition into higher education. Sitlington (2003) and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1996) suggested that preparing students for transition should include the following: teaching students to advocate for themselves, dealing with different demands of the postsecondary educational environment, functioning with the different levels of support provided by the institution, using assistive technology when available, ensuring that students are competent in literacy and mathematics, helping the student develop

appropriate social skills and interpersonal communication abilities, and encouraging the student to develop extracurricular interests.

In addition to some of the practical challenges, testing can also be an issue students with learning disabilities may have (Fuller & Wehmam, 2003). Although there are special accommodations that can be made for both the SAT and ACT exams, school counselor intervention can be beneficial for these students (Fuller & Wehman, 2003). Counselors work with students to teach test taking skills and relaxation techniques that can assist students in taking tests and help increase their scores, which will ultimately aid them in attending postsecondary education.

Following students' transition into postsecondary education, higher education counselors can assist in the transition for students with disabilities. Palombi (2000) suggested that many times students with disabilities do not have sufficient information from institutions of higher education about the services provided to students with disabilities and that colleges need to focus on services when giving information or tours to students with special needs. Moreover, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1996) suggested that postsecondary personnel should have an open communication of prerequisites and expectations with the high schools, help students to navigate effectively around the college campus, offer summer orientation programs on the admissions application process, requirements for admission, and general college survival skills, clarify roles of the students, and offer comprehensive orientation programs to students with special needs. Students with disabilities must choose their college and classes carefully in order to succeed by choosing a school that has resources and can assist them. Although many students with disabilities have been evaluated before attending college, there may be more assessment needed to assist in planning their educational strategies (Satcher, 1989). The most important skills for success in postsecondary education for students with disabilities are self-determination, problem-solving, understanding one's disability, goal setting, and self management (Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

Nearly all of the prior research focuses on a broad spectrum of students with a number of disabilities; however, very few have a specific focus on rural students in special education. The present research aims to shed light upon national data about rural students enrolled in special education in secondary schools. Special emphasis is placed upon the roles of school counselors, and the implications for counselors to promote success for the population of students in rural special education programs transitioning to postsecondary education.

Method

The data were derived from the United States Education Longitudinal Study (hereafter referred to as ELS: 2002). ELS: 2002 is the fourth major longitudinal study sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), closely reflecting the research purposes and designs of its three predecessor studies (i.e., National Longitudinal Study-72, High School & Beyond, and National Education Longitudinal Study: 88). The ELS: 2002 sample represents a universe file of approximately 25,000 schools with a 10th grade in the United States. For the 792 schools who participated in the ELS: 2002, 25 students were randomly selected from each school with Asian and Hispanic students being oversampled to compensate for their low numbers relative to the population. The oversampling of Asian and Hispanic students ensures representative participation over the twelve-year longitudinal design of the study. All fifty states and Puerto Rico were sampled. The representative sample included a nationally stratified sample by gender and race/ethnicity for the United States' population. The sample was comprised of US students who were 51.1% female and 49.9 % male; 62.2 % white; 13.3% black or African American; 15% Hispanic or Latino; 4.5% Asian or Pacific Islander; .9% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 3.9% whose identity included more than one race or ethnicity. The ELS: 2002 contains nationally stratified data to include a representative sample of United States' students by race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), region, and particularity relevant for the present study, special education status. The ELS: 2002 contains data from parents, students, school administrators, teachers, and school records. The ELS began in 2002 and will conclude in 2014. As a longitudinal study, the ELS is a work in progress. The United States National Center for Education Statistics releases a follow-up every two years in the study (Ingels, et al., 2004). As of this writing data are available for the first follow up in 2004. Data for the present research were drawn from high school seniors in the 2003- 2004 school year.

The subjects in the ELS: 2002 comprised a sample of 12,108 students, 738 of whom were enrolled in special education. The sample for the present study provides a representative sample of the population

of students enrolled in special education in the United States and Puerto Rico, one of the advantages of the naturally stratified data, which includes a sample representative of the population of students in the United States.

Chi Square analyses of school urbanicity (the term ELS uses to define schools categorized as urban, suburban, or rural) were computed for educational expectation, seeing a counselor for college information, and gender for students in special education. The Chi Square procedure is an appropriate statistic for these analyses as they are nominal data points computed by percentage values (Gay & Airasian, 2003)

Table 1
School Urbanicity * Has Gone To Counselor for College Entrance Information * Special Education Program Chi Square

Ever in special education		Has gone to counselor for college information		No	Yes	Total
No	School urbanicity	Urban	Count	2084	1778	3862
			% within School urbanicity	54.0%	46.0%	100.0%
		Suburban	Count	3145	2583	5728
			% within School urbanicity	54.9%	45.1%	100.0%
		Rural	Count	1254	856	2110
			% within School urbanicity	59.4%	40.6%	100.0%
	Total	Count		5217	6483	11700
			% within School urbanicity	55.4%	44.6%	100.0%
Yes	School urbanicity	Urban	Count	151	98	249
			% within School urbanicity	60.6%	39.4%	100.0%
		Suburban	Count	191	158	349
			% within School urbanicity	54.7%	45.3%	100.0%
		Rural	Count	73	67	140
			% within School urbanicity	52.1%	47.9%	100.0%
	Total	Count		415	323	738
			% within School urbanicity	56.2%	43.8%	100.0%

Findings

Students in special education exhibited a lower educational expectation when compared to mainstream students. Rural students in special education have a lower educational expectation than suburban students although students in special education from rural settings did not differ in any significant way compared with students in special education from urban settings. Urban special education students, in fact, had the lowest expectation of postsecondary education. In terms of gender, male students were more likely to be in special education programs in all urbanicity categories, with rural male students representing 58% of special education students compared to 42% of females. Rural students in special education did see school counselors for college entrance information, 48%, which is remarkable considering only 41% of rural students as a whole sought college entrance information from school counselors. These findings indicate rural students are more similar to suburban students in terms of utilizing counselors. Urban students had the least counselor involvement. Urban students in special education had the lowest educational expectation of all groups indicating one of a number of potential

explanations such as a lack of exposure to postsecondary educational opportunities, barriers to access, lack of specialized curricula (college-prep) in high school, economic, social, or familial constraints.

Table 2
Educational Expectation of Students Enrolled in Special Education

			Educational Expectation									Total
			Less than high school grad'n	GED or other equiv only	High school grad'n only	Attend or complete 2-year college/ school	Attend college, 4- year degree incomplete	Graduate from college	Obtain Master's degree or equiv	Obtain PhD, MD, or other advanced degree		
No	S U c r h b o a n l i c i t y	U	<i>n</i>	10	41	137	393	123	1320	993	694	3711
			%	.3%	1.1%	3.7%	10.6%	3.3%	35.6%	26.8%	18.7%	100.0%
		S	<i>n</i>	13	53	220	762	203	2041	1377	842	5511
			%	.2%	1.0%	4.0%	13.8%	3.7%	37.0%	25.0%	15.3%	100.0%
		R	<i>n</i>	6	31	125	433	71	751	433	243	2093
			%	.3%	1.5%	6.0%	20.7%	3.4%	35.9%	20.7%	11.6%	100.0%
		Total	<i>n</i>	29	125	482	1588	397	4112	2803	1779	11315
			%	.3%	1.1%	4.3%	14.0%	3.5%	36.3%	24.8%	15.7%	100.0%
Yes	S U c r h b o a n l i c i t y	U	<i>n</i>	4	5	24	46	17	66	51	29	242
			%	1.7%	2.1%	9.9%	19.0%	7.0%	27.3%	21.1%	12.0%	100.0%
		S	<i>n</i>	3	12	46	97	15	107	49	46	375
			%	.8%	3.2%	12.3%	25.9%	4.0%	28.5%	13.1%	12.3%	100.0%
		R	<i>n</i>	2	8	18	57	10	44	24	13	176
			%	1.1%	4.5%	10.2%	32.4%	5.7%	25.0%	13.6%	7.4%	100.0%
		Total	<i>n</i>	9	25	88	200	42	217	124	88	793
			%	1.1%	3.2%	11.1%	25.2%	5.3%	27.4%	15.6%	11.1%	100.0%

U = Urban, S = Suburban, R = Rural

Noteworthy about the data is that for all strata, students enrolled in special education exhibit a lower educational expectation than students who are not enrolled in special education. Educational expectations are formed by a number of variables such as parental educational level, access to higher education opportunities, and influence from the secondary school in the form of educational opportunities (field trips, Internet access, scholarship information, and counselors), college-prep courses, and graduation rates. Students in special education from suburban areas, which have the highest educational expectation, are still 9.5% less likely than students who are not in special education to complete a four year college degree. Students in special education from all areas (urban, suburban, rural) are less likely to seek and complete a postsecondary education even in cases where they have had access to a school counselor though the journey of any student to complete a college education is a complex one influenced by a variety of factors. Given the years since the first mandate for education in the least restrictive environment with the Education for All Handicapped Children act of 1975, the findings suggest the US has further to go to realize the letter and intent of the IDEA to ensure equal representation of students in special education seeking postsecondary education.

Implication

The findings suggest that school counselors can play a role in stemming the tide of dropout and promoting enrollment in postsecondary education. Because students in special education are more likely to come into contact with school counselors due to their special education status, counselors can help students, along with parents and other school personnel, to develop a long-term educational and vocational plan. Though 73% of urban, 64% of suburban and 67% of rural high schools offer at least some vocational programs (NCES, 2002), engaging students in special education programs in planning

for careers that require training at a two or four year college necessitates counselors to help students develop attainable goals. Some recommendations include thinking beyond limitations and exploring possibilities by matching students to careers by interest and skill counseling. Another promising proposal is for school counselors to provide information on community colleges, trade schools, and universities that specifically recruit students with special needs. School counselors can make connections for special education students by establishing and maintaining contracts with personnel from the office of special student services at colleges in their area. Transition fairs including postsecondary schools and potential employers have been found helpful in rural communities (Baugher & Nichols, 2008).

A key issue for rural educators of all categories is that they often wear several different hats and are called upon to provide more than the general instructional services for which they are employed. In suburban settings one of the key challenges is one of perception. Though suburban students have the highest likelihood of seeking postsecondary education they also have the fewest vocational training programs which provide a vehicle for well paying occupations for students who are not interested in seeking a traditional postsecondary college education. Urban students face the lowest expectation despite perceived advantages urban centers offer in opportunity for work and postsecondary educational opportunities. Making the connection and following through makes the key difference. Counselors are in a unique position to connect students in special education to postsecondary opportunities because of their involvement in placement, Individual Education Plans, and mandatory re-evaluations of special education status.

Students in rural special education programs face challenges in attaining postsecondary education due to constraints of location, availability of specialized programs, access to a college-prep curriculum, and economical considerations. Despite these challenges, students enrolled in rural special education programs fare better than urban students due, in part, to community involvement in schools and smaller enrollments (Rose-Gold, 1991). Data from the national study presented here illustrate that educational expectations are crucial to promoting the spirit and practice of furthering education so that students enrolled in special education have the opportunity to achieve their dreams.

School counselors need to be knowledgeable of special education issues as they are often the special education liaison between the schools, parents, and postsecondary opportunities. Because the percentage and total number of special education students and the accommodations made by educators continues to rise, it makes sense from a practical standpoint for counselors to continue to be engaged in the dialog of special education student services as school counselors are often the conduit by which parents, teachers, and administrators connect with each other for the specific purpose of helping special education students. Even though there is some variance in the services provided by school counselors by region and urbanicity, few other school personnel, with the exception of special education teachers and resource personnel, have advanced training in the identification of special needs and knowledge of the assessment process and resources available to meet the needs of the growing body of special education students. While there is some debate nationally as to the role and function of school counselors, involvement in the specific needs of special education students is crucial to help special education students advance to postsecondary education or employment. As school counselors' primary focus is helping students succeed in the academic, career, and personal/social areas of their lives, school counselors must be aware of and key players in the national and regional trends in special education services to provide opportunities for special education students beyond their high school graduation. By focusing on the total educational experience of students from PK-postsecondary, school counselors along with parents and other educators create opportunities for students in special education from urban, suburban, and rural locales.

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